



Courts taking hard line on fines

By ANN ZANIEWSKI
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A new Oakland County Circuit Court pilot program that cracks down on unpaid court fines has been successful, with almost every defendant paying on time.

"It speeds up the reception of money and brings (in) more," Court Administrator Kevin Oeffner said. "So far, we're pretty pleased."

The five judges participating in the pilot program, which kicked off Dec. 4, tell defendants when they enter a plea or are convicted that they'll have to pay at least a portion of their court costs the day they're sentenced. People who don't have a court-appointed attorney are expected to shell out at a minimum of \$200, while people who do are asked to pay at least \$500.

Those who don't visit the court's reimbursement division by the end of their sentencing day to pay at least that amount and set up a payment plan for the rest of what is owed have to appear before Circuit Judge Steven Andrews to explain why.

Andrews can order penalties ranging from community service to jail time, and has said that he's ready to tell people who say they can't afford their fines but have luxury items - such as a boat - to sell them.

So far, only three people haven't paid on time. But all ended up settling their score with the court just before their hearings with Andrews.

"I'm the enforcer," Andrews said, smiling.

The pilot program was designed to increase the collection rate of fees and fines and speed up the court's receipt of the money. Prior to the program and in courtrooms with judges who don't participate in it, defendants generally aren't given a deadline by which they have to pay their costs, although there's a Michigan court rule that says courts can order that payment be made on the day of sentencing.

"Typically, we were collecting well after sentencing," Oeffner said.

When someone doesn't pay what they owe, the reimbursement division tries to recoup the money through various means, such as by sending notices in the mail or garnishing wages. There have

been times when people complete the terms of their probation - and are released from court supervision - without paying all of their costs.

The court uses taxpayer-provided funds to pay for appointed attorneys for people who can't afford to hire their own. Oeffner said the court, which spent \$4.6 million on court-appointed attorneys in 2006, has been getting reimbursed an average of about 23 cents on the dollar.

With defendants' sentencing dates usually set about five weeks in advance, court officials began collecting money as part of the pilot program in January. So far, more than \$38,000 has been collected, some of which would have been paid anyway.

"There's no doubt that some if it would not have been paid," or paid much later in the process, Oeffner said.

Along with Andrews, circuit judges Wendy Potts, Colleen O'Brien, Edward Sosnick and Rudy Nichols are participating in the pilot program. Oeffner said he hopes it expands to include all the judges.

Oeffner said he's sensed that there's been a cultural shift around the courthouse, with people realizing that the court is serious about enforcing its orders.

"We're collecting money, and we're doing it earlier on," Oeffner said. "The word is starting to get out."